

THE LOST STORY

Col. Rufus S. Bratton, one of the few men who played a creditable role in the events that developed into the Pearl Harbor disaster on Dec. 7, 1941, died last week in an army hospital in Honolulu. His death occurred within a few miles of the great naval base which was visited with a catastrophe which he vainly sought to avert.

Col. Bratton was chief of far eastern intelligence in the war department in 1941. He played a part in breaking the Japanese code and thereafter handled most of the intercepted messages which were read in Washington without the knowledge of the Japanese.

Col. Bratton realized from his reading of these decoded communications, which were known in Washington official circles under the name of "Magic," that war was imminent early in December of 1941. This was a knowledge which most of the other officials in positions of high military or civil responsibility never cared, then or later, to admit. The official thesis of the Roosevelt administration and its military agents was that the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor came without any warning whatsoever.

Yet, three days before the attack, Col. Bratton had in his hands the celebrated "East Wind Rain" message. This was broadcast as a fake Japanese weather report by [previous arrangement with diplomatic stations thruout the world. It was the code warning of the coming war.

Col. Bratton could interest no one in this momentous tipoff. When he went to Gen. Gerow, chief of war plans, suggesting that American overseas bases be alerted, he was brushed off with the word that they were already adequately informed. When he went to the secretary of the general staff, Col. Walter Bedell Smith, later a lieutenant general and chief of staff to Gen. Eisenhower, Smith dismissed him with the statement that he "did not want to discuss the matter further."

In the last hours before the blow fell on Pearl Harbor, Col. Bratton had further reason to know that war was now hours or perhaps only minutes away. He had decoded Japan's final note, breaking off relations with the United States, and he had the companion message directing the Japanese ambassadors in Washington to present that note at 1 p. m., Washington time, Dec. 7.

Col. Bratton knew from history that severance by Japan of relations invariably coincided with a surprise attack and declaration of war. "It meant to me," he later testified, "that Japan planned to attack the United States at some point, at or near 1 o'clock that day."

He sought to locate Gen. Marshall, the army chief of staff. Marshall had disappeared on a horseback ride. Bratton cooled his heels for some three and a half hours. Finally he was able to lay his information before his superior, two hours before Japanese bombers descended on Pearl Harbor. Marshall directed a message to Pearl Harbor and other outlying bases, but sent it by commercial telegraph and radio, without instructions that it was urgent. The "warning" was eventually read seven hours after the attack.

Altho commended by a board of general officers which investigated Pearl Harbor, Bratton never was promoted. He retired on disability in 1952. Col. Otis K. Sadtler, chief of the military branch of the army signal corps, who worked with Col. Bratton in handling the intercepted Japanese messages and concurred in Bratton's interpretation of their meaning, also shared in the commendation of the army board. He, too, died in 1954, never having been promoted.

Many of the principal actors in the great and tragic drama at Pearl Harbor have been removed by death. The "investigation" of the attack under Democratic control in 1945-46 was a political coverup. Members of the Republican minority protested the obstructions put in their way and emphasized the deliberate omissions in the story.

When, in 1953, the Eisenhower administration came into office, with Republican control of both houses of Congress, it had the opportunity to reopen the inquiry and establish the full truth. Many of the key witnesses were then alive. But this Republican administration did not choose to act. It has permitted the story to die with the witnesses.